INTERNATIONAL

Pakistan assures India it won't raise bilateral issues at ARF

AFP, Yogyakarta

Pakistan has assured India that it will not raise any bilateral disputes if it is allowed to join a regional security forum, an Indonesian foreign ministry official said yesterday.

Makarim Wibisono said India had expressed its concerns that Pakistan would use the 23-member Asean regional forum (ARF) to raise issues such as Kashmir

But Indonesian Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda has written to his Indian counterpart Yashwant Sinha to relay Pakistan's assurances,

"There was a letter from the Pakistani foreign minister (Khurshid Mehmud Kasuri) guaranteeing that Pakistan will not raise bilateral issues," Wibisono told reporters.

He said India and Pakistan have lobbied Indonesia, who holds the rotating chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), on the issue. "We have told the Indians that their



Iraqis survey the damage of an explosion in a crowded Kurdish market in the oil-rich city of Kirkuk north of Baghdad yesterday. Four people were killed and 25 wounded in the blast.

Honduras begins troop withdrawal from Iraq

4 killed in Kirkuk blast, Dutch soldier & Russian killed in attack

Honduras has begun its troop withdrawal from Iraq, as the first of its 369 soldiers arrived in Kuwait, Honduran President, Ricardo Maduro, announced in an interview proadcast early yesterday from

"I'm pleased to officially announce to the Honduran people that we have begun withdrawing our soldiers from Irag and that some of them are already in Kuwait," Maduro

Republic decided to pull their troops out of Iraq last month, following Spain's decision to do the same The Honduran soldiers and some 300 Dominican troops were attached to the 1,400-strong

Spanish-led brigade in Najaf, 160 kilometers (100 miles) south of

Maduro did not specify how many troops had left Iraq, but said preparations for a full withdrawal were well under way and that all the troops would soon return to Tegucigalpa

He refused to provide dates on the pullout "for the security of the

Madro is on a tour of Japan Spain and Italy aimed at promoting foreign investment in Honduras.

Meanwhile, four people were killed and 25 wounded in an explosion in Iraqi city of Kirkuk yesterday while a Dutch soldier died overnight after being wounded in a grenade attack in Samawa and a Russian

national was killed in Baghdad The death was the first to hit the

Dutch contingent in Iraq. Another Dutch soldier was wounded in the attack which happened Monday around 1750 GMT on a Samawa bridge.

"The explosion happened in a crowded Kurdish district at 9:50 am (0550 GMT), leaving four dead and 25 hurt," police officer Shirkou Shaker Hakim told AFP.

The casualty count was confirmed at the Azadi hospital by doctor Bakshan Abdallah, who said that 14 of the wounded were "seriously hurt".

Police said the blast was caused by a powerful device left near the old mosque in the Kurdish area of Iraq's ethnically

lated by Kurds and Arabs.

In another incident one Russian national was killed and two others taken hostage in an attack in Baghdad, RIA Novosti guoted the Russian embassy in Baghdad as saying yesterday.

The three were employed by the Interenergoservice company which supplies to the war-torn country, the report quoted officials as saying.

A group of armed men attacked the Russians as they were returning from work by car in Baghdad on Monday afternoon, the report said.

They had been working to restore an electric power station located some 50 kilometers (30 miles) south of Baghdad.

Bush's firm support for Rumsfeld may threaten his reelection bid

US President George W. Bush's unqualified support for his embattled Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who is facing resignation calls over a widening Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal, may dent the presi-

"You are doing a superb job. You are a strong secretary of defence," Bush said during a trip to the Pentagon, situated just outside Washington, on Tuesday.

Bush spoke before television cameras flanked by Rumsfeld. Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Iraq's newly-approved US ambassador John Negroponte and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Richard Myers in a show of administration

The president spoke after viewing classified pictures, similar to the Bush's job rating dips, support for war down

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush's job approval rating has slipped to a new low and public support for the war in Iraq has declined, according to a poll released on Monday.

The CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll found Bush's approval rating had dipped to 46 percent, down from 52 percent a month earlier. Bush led presumptive Democratic nominee John Kerry 48 percent to 47 percent, a reversal of a poll taken last week when Kerry had a one-point edge, in a statistically insignificant shift.

The new poll, with a sampling error of three percentage points, was conducted among 1,003 adults, Friday to Sunday, amid a broadening scandal over abuse of Iragi prisoners by US troops.

Only 44 percent said they believed the war was worthwhile, in

Indian Election

Cong terms Andhra results a revolution

Results 'unexpected', says BJP

Terming its victory march in Andhra Pradesh Assembly elections a silent revolution, Congress leader YS Rajasekhar Reddy has said that the Common man was vexed with TDP

"It is very clear that Andhra Pradesh is witnessing a silent revolution to dislodge the TDP government. Common man is vexed with its misrule and wants a change," a beaming former Legislature Party leader YS Rajasekhar Reddy, widely seen as Congress' chief ministerial candidate, said as early trends indicated a landslide victory for his Asked about the raging

to resolve the issue in co-operation with its ally Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS)

On the other hand BJP vesterday termed the Congress-TRS sweep in Andhra Pradesh as 'unexpected' even if it ruled out any review of its The party also expressed confi-

dence that the outcome of the Lok Sabha polls in the state would be "altogether different. "We are surprised by the results We did not expect this kind of perfor-

mance," party spokesman Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi said. The party will "find out" the

reasons for the debacle of the TDP-BJP alliance and take remedia



Congress Party supporters celebrate a state election win for a party ally with Party president Sonia Gandhi's poster and party flags in front of Congress Party headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh Chandrababu Naidu, a key regional ally of India's ruling Hindu nationalist coalition, conceded defeat in state elections in the southern state dealing a blow to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's efforts to form a government.

Prison abuse mars US bid to garner support for Iraq

graphic photographs that have hit

the front pages of US newspapers,

showing abuse of Iragi prisoners at

Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq by US

States military and it does not repre-

sent the United States of America,

Bush said, adding that there will be a

"full accounting" for the events

weight behind his defence chief, the

Republican president has decided

to turn a deaf ear to growing calls for

Rumsfeld to resign from opposition

san Democrats went for the secre-

tary of defence's throat. The shocker

was how few friends of the Bush

administration jumped to his aid,

wrote conservative columnist

Robert Novak in a Monday editorial

"It was not surprising that parti-

Democrats and the US media.

However, in throwing his full

inside Abu Ghraib

"It does not represent our United

The widening scandal of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq is denting Washington's bid to gain international support as it prepares to hand sovereignty back to Iraq on June 30.

However, the US Department of State insists preliminary talks on a new UN resolution aimed at underpinning the handover had "proceeded well," even as fresh accounts of abuse continue to seep onto the front pages of newspapers around the world

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters Monday: "I'd say there's a fair amount of congruence on the major issues to be addressed." in referring to the resolution bid, for which no formal document has yet to be

A senior State Department official nevertheless underlined that the graphic photos of abuse that emerged in recent days had led some US allies to seek "reassurances" that the affair would be dealt with "seriously."

matter of concern to people, it is a matter people want to talk about. said the official who requested anonymity, adding "it makes it more disruptive ... there is more that has to be dealt with as we move for-

The photos have shown smiling US soldiers posing beside a pyramid of naked Iraqi prisoners; a dead and bruised Iraqi man laying in an unzipped body bag and Iragis being sexually humiliated.

"I don't see any particular delay in moving forward on other issues, but there is certainly an interest on the part of other countries in knowing we are handling this right," the official said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell and his deputy Richard Armitage acknowledged last week that the abuse scandal had put back the US diplomatic mission in Iraq and across the Middle East.

The scandal has also presented major setback to British Prime Minister Tony Blair, a strong US ally

on the UN Security Council. Blair's Labour Party currently

The photos are "certainly a has the backing of fewer than a third of voters, its worst position for more than 17 years, a British poll showed late Monday.

> seat on the Security Council, but it has troops deployed in Iraq, and the Italian premier was moved Monday to voice his concern over the ongong fallout from events inside Abu Italian Prime Minister Silvio

Italy does not hold a permanent

Berlusconi, also a top US ally, condemned on Monday the abuse of prisoners in Iraq and warned it was an obstacle to peace in the

France and Germany, two of the main opponents to the US-led war that toppled Saddam Hussein last year, have also denounced the abuses committed in the prison, which was formerly used by Saddam to torture and execute his opponents.

French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, said there was "no question" that Paris would not send troops to Iraq, despite US hopes that French troops might be sent to Iraq under a possible UN mission.

UK soldiers killed Iraqi civilians: Amnesty

British soldiers have fired on and eight-year-old girl, in situations where there was apparently no serious threat and in many cases the British army has not even investigated the incidents, human rights group Amnesty International said in a report published yesterday.

"UK soldiers have opened fire and killed civilians in southern Iraq in circumstances where there was apparently no imminent threat of death or serious injury to themselves or others," the report said. "In many cases where civilians

have been killed by UK forces the British army has not even opened an investigation. "Where investigations have

been opened, the (British) Royal Military Police, which is responsible for conducting the investigations, has been highly secretive. It has provided (the victims') families with little or no information about the progress or conclusions of investi-

The Amnesty report, which is likely to add to the furore over the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners

by the British and US forces occupying Iraq, said British soldiers were implicated in the killings of 37 Iraqi killed Iraqi civilians, including an civilians since combat operations were officially declared over on May

1, 2003. Amnesty cited the case of eightvear-old Hanan Saleh Matroud, who was fatally shot in the stomach in Karmat Ali on August 21, 2003 while soldiers from Company B of the 1st Battalion of the Kings' Regiment were patrolling the town.

It quoted an eyewitness as saying: "Hanan was standing in the alley about 60 to 70 metres (yards) from the armoured vehicle. Suddenly a soldier aimed and fired a shot which hit Hanan in her lower

Two months later the British army sent a letter to the girl's family acknowledging: "A soldier concerned for his own safety and the safety of his patrol fired a warning shot into the air in an attempt to disperse... stones throwers."

'The suggestion was that this wound (was) sustained as a result of the warning shot, which has not been proven but (has been) accepted as a possibility," Amnesty quoted the army letter as saying.

MAOIST VIOLENCE, EXTORTION

Aid agencies to suspend operations in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Foreign development agencies said Monday they would suspend operations in Nepal affecting more than 55,000 poor people because of extortion by Maoist rebels and deteriorating security.

Agencies affiliated with the European Union and the governments of Britain, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Japan and The Netherlands said they would stop activities in violence-torn stretches of the Himalayan kingdom from

The biggest programme to be suspended is a German and British initiative to bring employment and food security to 30,000 people freed from virtual slavery in 2000 when Nepal outlawed hereditary forced farm labour.

A joint statement by the agencies

said they would halt work indefinitely because of "Maoist extortion and security problems." It said rebels had in recent weeks

threatened development workers when seeking bribes

"We have made it particularly clear that agencies neither register with nor contribute to Maoist organisations," the statement said

United Nations agencies had in

March threatened to stop aid operations in Nepal unless the Maoists halted extortion The Maoists have been waging

an eight-year armed campaign to turn the world's only Hindu kingdom into a secular, communist republic The uprising has left some 9.500 people dead.

The rebels accuse aid agencies of serving the Kathmandu elite and not the impoverished majority in the country of 25 million people

Arroyo, Poe in tight race in Philippines

INQUIRER/ ANN, Manila

private computer school

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and actor Fernando Poe Jr. were neck and neck in the presidential race as of Monday night, according to partial and unofficial results of a quick count being conducted by a

The quick count by AMA Education System showed Panfilo Lacson in third place, followed by Eddie Villanueva and Raul Roco.

As of 8:40 p.m., Arroyo had 109,134 votes, while Poe had 108,642 votes, or a difference of only 492 votes Lacson had 53,186 votes,

In the vice presidential race, Loren Legarda was ahead of Noli de Castro by 16,921 votes. Legarda had 150,377 votes and De Castro, 133,456. Hermie Aquino had

20,101.

Villanueva, 27,212 and, Roco,

The votes came from 9,794 precincts, representing 3.3 percent of the total of 295,459 precincts

Karim Bangcola, AMA executive

president, said the 9.794 precincts were located in 62 towns and cities in Luzon, the Visayas and AMA is conducting the quick count for "Eleksyon 2004," the

> elections by GMA-7, Philippine Daily Inquirer, Inq7.net, PLDT, Smart, Catholic Media Network, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, dzBB and New Media AMA is owned by Amable Aguiluz

> coverage of the local and national

presidential consultant on computer education during the Estrada administration. But Aguiluz is widely believed to be supporting Arroyo.

The partial results came from

Butuan (119 precincts), Legazpi (98), Balanga (1), Batangas City 153), Lipa City (96), Nasugbu, Batangas (33), Baguio (166), Tagbilaran (33), City of Valencia (119), Malolos (83), Meycauayan, Bulacan (80), Tuguegarao (223), Iriga (8), Naga City (145), Roxas (39), Bacoor, Cavite (47), Dasmariñas, Cavite (205), Cebu City (206), Lapu-lapu (129), and Mandaue (29).



President George W. Bush (R) and US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld (L) emerge from the Pentagon on Monday after meeting privately with top US military leaders. At an hour long briefing attended by top cabinet officials and Rumsfeld, Bush was shown a representative sample of the hundreds of photographs of abuses of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers that have not yet been seen by the US public

Kerry collects signatures for Rumsfeld's resignation

AFP, Washington

Some 275,000 people have signed a petition launched by Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry calling for US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to resign over the Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal, his

campaign director said Monday. "More than 275,000 supporters signed our petition," said Mary Beth Cahill in a statement. "Americans want accountability and responsibility at the highest levels of our government."

Calls have multiplied for Rumsfeld to resign after images of Iraqi prisoners being abused by US personnel at Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad were made public, scandalizing opinion worldwide, especially among Arabs.

US President George W. Bush, who has promised a "full accounting" over the scandal, defended Rumsfeld, saying he was doing a "superb job"

Kerry also has questioned Bush's right to lead in the wake of the scandal.